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ABSTRACT

An examination of key symbols and structures of the recent film, "Fried Green Tomatoes," reveals the nature of the process of coding representations of the real world and its effects. The movie depicts two parallel stories of female friendship. Changes and development of the characters are primarily portrayed through changes in their appearance. The clearest message of the application of change is in the change in the appearance of the character Evelyn to a more tasteful and controlled "look." Other visual symbolism is provided by food, which at times represents love and social worth. Understanding such symbolic messages is vitally important for today's consumers of information. In daily interaction with mass media, however, the encoding and decoding of the world is overlooked because the visual images look real. Examining the film gives insight into coding and decoding. (Contains 4 references.) (SLD)

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The Appearance of Change in "Fried Green Tomatoes"

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The Appearance of Change in *Fried Green Tomatoes*

Gretchen Bisplinghoff

In the current digital age of instant information, consumers encode and decode computer languages and symbols of electronic communication. They become aware of the translation process necessary to access this new form of expression. Learning the translation process can establish a heightened awareness of the process of selection and interpretation involved in coding these particular messages. Understanding the nature and use of symbolic messages is vitally important for today's consumers of information, particularly the messages of the mass media. However, in daily interaction with mass media images, this process of encoding and decoding a representation of the world is consistently overlooked precisely because the visual images look "real"; look like their referents. Also, constructions within media such as film guide interpretation of messages; internal structures often establish guidelines for "correct" translation of messages for audience consumption. The film in effect pre-digests the material for the audience; the resulting filmic conclusions seem natural and inevitable. An examination of key symbols and structures of a recent Hollywood film, FRIED GREEN TOMATOES, reveals the nature of the coding process and its effects.

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES depicts parallel stories of female friendship. The growing relationship between Evelyn Couch and Ninny Threadgoode mirrors that of Ruth Jameson and Idgie Threadgoode, as it is presented in Ninny's stories of the past. Both sets of female friendships are shown to be empowering; however, it is also clear that the film's structure and visual strategies work to translate and define the meaning of that empowerment. The present day characters and their relationship acts as translation/application for today's viewers, particularly female viewers. The parallel tales feature the characters of Idgie and Ninny as the catalysts, while Ruth and Evelyn reflect the changes that the relationship brings about. However, the depiction of Evelyn's transformation, the application of the film's message for today, is presented so that the character embodies and reflects a carefully constructed change based on a much narrower interpretation of the power of female friendship. The movie focuses particularly on Evelyn's change in appearance as a visual metaphor for the changes she is experiencing as a result of her friendship with Ninny. The audience's understanding of the meaning of Idgie and Ruth's friendship and its impact in Evelyn's life is conveyed primarily

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through changes in her costume, make-up, hair, body image and relation to food.

Idgie and Ruth are both young, slim, beautiful women who come to care deeply for each other—care enough to defy the rigid conventions of small town Southern life in the Thirties. Ninny's presentation of their story in the film filters out the lesbian love clearly set forth in the book, translating it to "friendship." Idgie's unconventional lifestyle is primarily displayed throughout by her costuming. From her young tomboy days on, she is depicted in "male" outfits—suits with short knicker pants, overalls, etc. She is shown as fearless and aggressive, whether braving the danger of wild bees or rescuing Ruth from an abusive marriage. Ruth and Idgie together build a business and raise a family outside of the "normal" societal definition of marriage and family. Together they support themselves by running the successful Whistle Stop Cafe (where the specialties of the house are barbeque and fried green tomatoes). This visual presentation of an unconventional lifestyle; a different but successful lifestyle between two women, is translated through Ninny's connection with Evelyn primarily by her successfully redesigning her appearance according to prevailing societal standards of attractive.

A MARY KAY MAKE-OVER

In the present, Evelyn's empowerment and the impact of Ninny's tales primarily focus on change in Evelyn's personal appearance; in her presentation of herself and her image. Evelyn is the "initially downtrodden and miserable fatty"[1] who gets a "make-over" in the course of the film. She's an overweight "middle-aged frump"[2] who's fallen into a "menopausal funk."[3] Through the course of the film her weight remains the same but she learns to package it in a more societally acceptable presentation to an audience conditioned to images re-enforcing the message that only "thin is beautiful." During three-fourths of the film her weight is exaggerated by her costuming. Her clothes are designed to enhance the perception of her weight through the use of bright primary colors (such as red) for her dresses with features such as wide white lace collars and "wrap around" or Empire line styles that accentuate her size. Often she wears dresses with very large floral patterns—always against a white background—which are accented by large accessories such as sling bag purses and heavy gold jewelry. Her hair is a massive mop of uncontrolled reddish-gold curls which accents the width of her face. Her make-up colors also emphasize bright red lipsticks and dark eye liner and lash coloration.

In the final scenes of the film, when she comes to the nursing home for the last time, her appearance has been transformed. As she gets out of her car, the audience is cued by a shot of the logo on the rear window of the pink car that she is now a Mary Kay cosmetics representative, although this has never been mentioned and we never see her working at this job at any time in the film. Shortly before, at the immediately preceding visit, Evelyn told Ninny that her influence had caused Evelyn to look in a mirror and she didn't like what she saw so she "changed." As she steps from the car we see the tangible results of her decision. She wears a pastel pink, tailored suit with a straight skirt and an off-white tailored blouse which is accented by a single strand of pearls, high heels and a small navy clutch purse on a thin shoulder

strap. Her hair has been straightened and subdued into a smooth "page boy" which curls under at chin level to lengthen the line of her face. Her make-up is also subdued to current, more fashionable "natural" shades of brown eye make-up and pink shades for blusher and lipstick. She has obviously learned to apply Mary Kay techniques.

The other tangible results of Evelyn's change are her refusal to give up a parking place without a fight and her announcement to Ed that she's taking Ninny in to live with them whether he approves or not (re-enforcing message to the growing numbers of women who, as part of the "sandwich" generation, are taking responsibility both for caring for children and caring for aging parents). However, the clear message of the application of change for the viewer lies in the emphasis on the visual change in Evelyn's appearance—to a more "tasteful," "fashionable" controlled "look" defined by conventional standards—not on growth as a person of worth and intellect. That this is the central thrust of the film's interpretation is no more clearly illustrated than by the Mary Kay Cosmetics commercial which opens the rental cassette version—all female viewers are offered a free "make-over" and lipstick simply by calling the Mary Kay 800 number appearing on the screen.

FOOD AS LANGUAGE

Throughout the film, images of food are central in guiding interpretation of the film's message; food operates as a visual symbol on many levels both private and public. As Naomi Wolf points out; ". . . within the context of the intimate family, food is love, and memory, and language . . . in the public realm, food is status and honor. Food is the primal symbol of social worth."[4] Food operates as bonding between individuals and generations. However, there are wider implications of the use and presentation of food in the past which has been transformed for the present. Food in the past is shown being used first as a powerful means of independence for Idgie and Ruth and then as part of an altruistic, empowering contribution within society. The implications of this power are filtered through the present day application of Evelyn's use of food as individual control of her life through control over her body—reinforcement of a message that has been taken to heart by millions of American girls and women who obsess about food and eating to the point of starvation: "Compulsiveness about the food we eat and the bodies we put it into has turned eating disorders into a national epidemic."[5]

Evelyn Couch's first appearance onscreen in the opening scenes of the film immediately defines the source/solution to her problems—her relationship with food. This scene also establishes the connection of past and present through food and reflects the change in the message from public to private. The first shot of Evelyn frames her in medium close-up through the passenger side car window. As the camera slowly closes in on her face, she begins to unwrap and eat a candy bar while staring out the window. A cut away reveals to the audience what she is staring at—the now deserted, dilapidated Whistle Stop Cafe. More importantly, the camera is focused tightly in on and reading down the bill of fare of rich desserts and specialty items of the cafe with Evelyn—homemade fruit pies and cobblers, fried green tomatoes, etc. She stares enraptured, eating her candy bar,

as the noises of a ghost train from the past move down the tracks in a swirl of leaves. Past and present connect through the evocation of the food of the time.

FOOD AS LOVE

Both sets of friends are shown bonding through images of food. Idgie and Ruth run a cafe and are intimately connected to the preparation and presentation of food. Key moments in their relationship are demonstrated through food as visual language. During their initial "courtship" Idgie and Ruth go on a picnic. The camera pans across the picnic foods laid out on a blanket before tilting up to the seated couple. Idgie then rises; the camera follows her as she goes across the meadow to get a special gift for Ruth—wild honey. She returns to Ruth (who is astonished and emotionally overcome by her bravery) covered with wild bees and bearing a jar of golden liquid. Later in the film, after Idgie has rescued the pregnant Ruth from Frank and they have established themselves in the restaurant, their lives together are demonstrated through a series of "still lifes" of food and then the use of that food in a food fight. Individual shots of baskets of perfect, lusciously ripe fruits and vegetables, as well as bowls of eggs, cake frosting and a pan of frying tomatoes are shown in a montage sequence that lingers on their beauty of form and evocation of memory. Idgie and Ruth, however, then use these foodstuffs in a goodnatured physical expression of their relationship; picking up handfuls of berries, flour, etc., and throwing or squishing them on the other. The constable who comes in to see what the commotion is about and threatens to arrest them receives a spatula of frosting down his face and the front of his shirt (delivered slowly and deliberately in extreme close-up).

FOOD AS SOCIAL WORTH

However, as this run-in with the law demonstrates, there are wider implications for the use of food within Ruth and Idgie's lives. Food equals independence and freedom for Ruth and Idgie. Their ability with food makes their independent lifestyle possible and also quite literally delivers them from their oppressor, Ruth's ex-husband Frank, who continues to threaten them through the KKK. When Frank tries to kidnap his son, he instead becomes part of the specialty of the house. The alliance of women, Blacks and dispossessed of the diner come together to defeat Frank. Immediately after Frank "disappears" there is a close-up shot of meat on the chopping block as a new batch of BBQ is being prepared—and then served to the law enforcement officers who come looking for Frank. Ruth and Idgie's use of food connects with, and makes a difference in, the social fabric of the times. They employ Blacks to prepare the BBQ; more importantly to the townspeople, they feed them out of the cafe and recognize them the same as they do the whites of town. Together they also feed "tramps," the dispossessed of the Depression, like Smokey Joe. His rehabilitation starts with a close-up of a huge plate of food on the counter, which is followed by a tilt up to a medium close-up of his upper body and face as he tries to get his drink-ravaged body to accept their gift. One of Idgie and Ruth's first acts as a couple involved hopping a freight and throwing canned goods off the train to the people of shanty towns along the tracks.

Evelyn and Ninny are also shown connecting through food; in this case, the gifts of food that Evelyn brings and shares with Ninny. Again, this focus is much narrower. Food is an ever-present part of Evelyn's costume—she constantly carries candy, doughnuts, crackerjacks, etc, as presents for others at the nursing home and for herself. The opening images are repeated throughout of Evelyn constantly eating—she shares what she brings with Ninny and what she eats changes—but she's still eating obsessively. Ninny accepts the candy and sweets, but can't handle the food of change, the "rabbit food," as it gives her gas. Evelyn's marital relationship also is presented in terms of the food she offers her husband. She tries unsuccessfully to get his attention with platters of fried chicken and crown roasts; she follows him to the television clutching an armful of beers. A difference in their food-based relationship is signaled initially by a close-up of a skimpy plate of greens and vegetables which he refuses to accept as his dinner.

Thus images of an unconventional life outside of marriage are defused and translated into very conventional images within marriage. Public activism becomes private consumerism. Love, courage and rebellion become a Mary Kay infomercial.

[1]John Simon, "Tenors, Tomatoes, and a Turkey," The National Review, 44 (March 30, 1992), 45.

[2]David Ehrenstine, "Fried Green Tomatoes caps a banner year for delesbianization," The Advocate (February 11, 1992), 67.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 189.

[5]Roberta Seid, Never Too Thin (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1989), 21.